DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 127 608 CS 202 871

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TITLE "Krokodil" Magazine: Laughter in the Soviet Union.
PUB DATE 76
NOTE 12p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Association for Education in Journalism (49th, College Park, Maryland, July 31-August 4, 1976)

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.83 HC-$1.67 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Editing; *Foreign Language Periodicals; *Humor; Journalism; *Periodicals; *Publications; Russian; Russian Literature; Satire
IDENTIFIERS *Krokodil; *Popular Culture

ABSTRACT

A 16-page, four-color-on-newsprint magazine, "Krokodil" is among the world's most popular magazines of humor and satire. As a product of the Pravda Publishing House, it is produced by a branch of the Central Committee of the Communist Party, yet there are no official taboos or guidelines. Connections, popularity, and profits give "Krokodil" clout. Paid circulation is at six million only because of a paper shortage and inadequate presses which already run 24 hours a day. Contributing to the success of "Krokodil" are its role as national ombudsman between public and government, strong reader identity, reputation for responding quickly to complaints, grass-roots connections, excellent relations with freelancers, and the strong, innovative character of the magazine. (Author/AA)

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# Krokodil Magazine: Laughter in the Soviet Union

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Paper submitted for the Magazine Division,
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College Park, Maryland

July, 1976

US 202 871

Krokodil Magazine: Laughter in the Soviet Union

Twenty million Soviet readers -- and perhaps other millions determined not to dignify "that magazine" by reading it -- surely know the significance of a tiny, rampant crocodile holding a harpoon like a scepter. The amiable creature which, folklore says, grins as it swallows its victims and weeps later, tops the masthead of Krokodil, the Soviet Union's unsinkable magazine success. A 16-page, four-color-on-newsprint magazine with 36 issues a year, Krokodil is among the world's most popular magazines of humor and satire.

Undeniably a political creature, Krokodil -- going strong at 54 -- does not merely pursue human folly at home and abroad. It regularly bites the hand that feeds it. Edited on the top floor of the carefully secured Pravda Publishing House, Krokodil is sustained in minimal office style but considerable prestige by Pravda's connection to the Central Committee of the Communist Party, the Soviets' ultimate power source.

Even the newest reader knows that Krokodil seldom, if ever, flouts official directives of the Central Committee. (Officially, "a Pravda man" is a member of the magazine's editorial board, but "he does not come (to meetings) very often", according to other members. Some Krokodil editors contend that the link to Pravda is even more slender: "We share the accounting offices, garage and technical services -- period.")

Clearly the magazine does not "make" political policy except in the sense that while it pursues issues at will it both forms and reflects public opinion. Krokodil nips -- hard at social types and specific individuals, including some high up within the system, who do not measure up to the ideals of the Soviets' planned society. Still, from government or party there are no official taboos or even "guidelines", the editors insist.

A cartoon cover from December, 1975 (No. 35/75) depicts street crime in outlying neighborhoods of large cities, despite the patrolled (or "laundered") streets like those which tourists see near Moscow's Red Square. At a murky streetlamp two very young toughs mug a citizen. Meanwhile five burly male commuters -- eyes front -- rush past in lock step, breathlessly uninvolved. The caption says "Police!" Mugging, still shocking to Soviet city-dwellers, combines with the universal don't-get-involved trait. The humor here, as elsewhere, defies description, however. The inept young criminals, the victim's helplessness (minus his hat and dignity) on the sidewalk, and the selfish retreat of the gasping city men probably say enough.

"One Way Conversation" captions another cover from May, 1976 (No. 15/76). The situation is again particular to current Soviet life but also universal in human experience. On his feet, a self-important middle-management bureaucrat, fascinated by his own voice, bawls into one of his four telephones. Aware that the man's hair, hands, glasses and papers are flying, the reader also notices that the telephone earpieces all ~~were~~ wear thick, neat bandages. Even in a planned society, some citizens opt out; they hear only what they want.

Obviously there are "lessons" in such vignettes. Above all, they are funny while true to human nature. Nearer the fringe of fantasy are such cartoons as another from the above issue (No. 15/76, p. 14). Three rather bored panelists watch a fourth speaker -- an author, perhaps, or a committee functionary? -- who has ended his talk in tears and holding a gun to his head. "Seems to me he's

carrying self-criticism too far," one of the three observes. While self-evaluation may be encouraged in some Soviet circles, obviously too much is enough.

Brash, determined Krokodil itself is no mere dispassionate observer of the passing scene. Occasionally boisterous and even sentimental, the magazine's humor is both topical and timeless. Above all, it is persistently moral, concerned with the "right" and "wrong" of issues and individuals, whom it judges by the values of the socialist state and the dogma of the Communist party. Obviously some values shift with the political tides. (For one thing, detente has created some problems in depicting capitalistic America. "Frankly, editing was easier before -- when we didn't have to like you," Krokodil's foreign editors point out, half in jest, to an American. Krokodil seems to meet that problem by stressing the aspects of America that ever Americans deplore: crime, pollution, CIA agents posing as diplomats. An occasional fat-cat financial titan -- complete with opera hat -- seems to be an irresistible stereotype, however.

Since the values of the state-supported "new morality" are not necessarily or totally rejections of the old values once associated with church, home and czar, and since humor universally acknowledges humanity, Krokodil probably does not need a more specific magazine formula. Oriented to the news of the day, keyed to prevailing socio-political ethics, and employing verbal and visual humor ranging from bald cartoon to subtle parody and from the one-liner to the unique fiction of the modern Russian feuilleton (a story naming people with their true names) Krokodil claims an unusually broad range of ages and interests in its readership.

If it does not quite have "something for everyone", despite the addition of this year's innovation, Satirobus, a youth magazine-within-the-magazine once a month, Krokodil probably comes as close as any Soviet publication does -- or perhaps as any magazine anywhere can. In the USSR, as in the USA, there has never

been agreement among mass media critics that a magazine can serve readers of all ages, or even should try.

Somewhat doctrinaire and hardly subtle, the experimental Satirobus is credited to Krokodil's new young editor, Evgeny Dubrovin. His other contributions include the International Roundup section, selected news from abroad. An Associated Press wirephoto (uncredited), showing a white Rhodesian woman taking a stroll while protected by two armed guards and a dog suggests the heavy irony -- or leaden wit -- favored on a page which may yet be in a shakedown period. Under Dubrovin, Krokodil conducts more frequent editorial crusades against such aggravations as shoddy consumer goods. (Poor shoes were scored in May, although the Minister of Light Industry also got his chance to explain.) Long stories run in installments are also more frequent.

Krokodil has become a national institution because of its familiar successes rather than its novelty. Its gallery of recognizable social types includes such ubiquitous figures as the birdbrained boss, the battle-axe mother, the all-thumbs public servant, the foggy spy, the drunk (sometimes treated sympathetically, sometimes with alarm or annoyance -- perhaps because alcoholism is still a serious problem among Soviet workers), the thieving factory hand, the lazy office assistant or indifferent shop clerk, among others.

Humorous treatment of them as well as of specific issues urges reform rather than revolt. Against a political background, Krokodil still fights -- and refights -- the battle of the sexes, although the magazine is only rarely sexist, and then is mildly so as it exploits pneumatic endowments on the female frame. However women readers seem unoffended, perhaps since art follows life and obviously many Soviet females are physically well-endowed.

Krokodil also admits the generation gap (youthful adulation of rock music stars is a favorite target) and the Pyotor principle that things are bound to go wrong, as well as a peculiarly Soviet version of the existential cry before the abyss. In the USSR, however, since Marx, Lenin and later leaders have presumably prescribed the evential cure for society's ills, and since the individual is, above all, a social being, public angst is not inspired by some vague yawning void but rather trembles in outrage before life's daily pitfalls and inevitable pratfalls.

A recent issue of Krokodil (again for convenience, No. 15/76) illustrates the range of subjects and their treatments. Amid amusing fillers, mini-editorials, brief reprints and light verse, the articles and short stories include a substantial one about financial relations between a building construction company and a tenant farm. This time, for a change, the farmers are "bad" and the builders are "good". Next, the poor organization of the transit industry in Soviet Asia is deftly worked over in an article, and then the shoddy shoe crisis is debated. A whimsical tale, "Bridegroom on Wheels", about a professional husband follows. The final page length article proposes that Ronald Reagan has no chance as a U.S. presidential candidate because he is a reactionary at a time when voters want moderation. Furthermore, his use of the Soviets as a threat to America simply is not convincing, the writer contends.

All of these are hardly laughing matters -- unless one recalls that topical humor calls upon the concerns of the day and that political satire freely savages "the opposition."

Among the departments and on-going features there is the same combination of eminently sober subjects and light treatments. The newest department deals with environmental pollution. Under an ingenious logo, The Flower and the Gear, in which a white daisy meshes neatly with a black gear against a grass green

background, readers are invited to become contributors by offering their sclutions to environmental problems. Substantial cash prizes are offered, and early responses are promising, editors report.

The environmental cartoons are attention-getters. Indeed all cartoons have high quality art work for visual appeal, but they also have a point which sticks in the mind. The merely zany would be rare in Krokodil. One environmental panel depicts a modern country lass heading for a city. Bearing the familiar shoulder yoke, she does not carry pails of milk or water to the smoggy town but instead has two balloons labelled "pure air." In another panel an inspection team stares dutifully into a stream heavily polluted by draining waste. Yet can things be so bad when contented fish and water fowl swim past? Yes -- since behind a large sewer pipe workmen inflate and launch beach toys and bath-tub ducks to fool the naive.

Other cartoons in this typical issue lambast favorite Krokodil targets like the bootlicking employee so subservient that when his sportman-boss practices archery the underling seizes the arrow in flight and obligingly runs it to the bullseye. Then there is the female citizen who would rather not operate the little state-owned convenience shop that supports her. Instead, it is padlocked and she wears her hat as she puzzles over which of several signs to post for the day: Out to Lunch, Closed for Dinner, Public Holiday, Closed for Inspection, or others.

Of the 24 cartoons in the issue, most are didactic and editorial. The rest are wry comments on human nature, particularly the half-dozen panels reprinted from the quality humor magazines of other socialist countries like Poland and Hungary. From the latter, for example, comes the panel where the soft-hearted visitor tiptoes away from the lion cage at the zoo. Inside, the shaggy toy-like beast has broken open the loaf tossed in presumably for a treat. Inside that, there is a file. Somebody understands about cages.

The hypothesis that Krokodil probably could have even greater circulation than at present is mentioned among Soviet journalists but cannot be tested. A serious, long-term paper shortage and the inadequacy of presses which already run 24 hours a day necessarily limit Krokodil to six million copies per issue. The magazine has 90% subscription readers at about $7.00 per year. The remaining 10% comes from news stand sales where, at about 20 cents a copy, Krokodil vanishes rapidly.

Certainly Krokodil has its detractors, although few actual competitors. The stiffest challenge probably comes from "The Society of the Twelve Chairs", a single newspaper page in the weekly Literaturnaya Gazetta (Literary Gazette). It is a publication of admittedly higher cerebral ambitions than Krokodil, which aims for the funnybone before the head. (The aim is lower down, Krokodil's enemies insist -- more like the shins and the rear.) Americans may note that while Krokodil has handled the recent news of CIA covert activities abroad somewhat less caustically than have some segments of the American press itself, Literaturnaya Gazetta's editor is being challenged in a Moscow court by Alfred Friendly, Jr. of Newsweek, one of the three American correspondents he has labelled CIA agents. One suspects that such news broadened the Krokodil grin wickedly.

Nonetheless, there are those deliberate non-readers who find Krokodil low-brow, disrespectful, hackneyed, dated, propagandistic, negative -- and maddeningly successful. That final point at least has business-ledger proof. Carrying no advertising, Krokodil makes "no less than 20 million rubles (nearly $30 million)" annually. That amount helps support some of the less popular Pravda periodicals. The first 100,000 copies of each edition pay Krokodil's bills. "Then it's like printing money," as one editor puts it.

Although important political connections and strong profits give Krokodil clout, there is, above all, the undeniable wallop of its popularity. It is

hardly enough to say that Russian culture has had a long line of humorists or that Europe has a history of successful humor magazines. No magazine lives long on reputation alone. Krokodil's readers say the magazine is lively, anti-elitist, timely, informed, a socialist safety valve, realistic, consistently well edited, literally laughable, and "the best thing about the postal system." Clearly all readers do not concur, but there are certain traits which emerge from the welter of fact and opinion about Krokodil, from observation of its pages and discussion with its editors. There may also be a few lessons for American magazines.

Despite the efforts of both the Soviet government and the Communist party to emphasize that the citizens constitute the state and that officials serve the people, there is nonetheless an enormous (perhaps inevitable) communications gap between public and government.

Decidedly aimed at mass readership -- which, however, seems to include intellectuals in about the same proportion as they occur in the population -- Krokodil has taken on the role of ombudsman between the public and the government.

If this particular ombudsman also has watchdog qualities and can look in two directions at once so much the better, it seems. What Krokodil sees in its restless surveillance of Soviet life becomes the material in print every 10 days. There is thus an unbeatable immediacy about the magazine's content. Furthermore, because the magazine has earned the confidence of the public which buys it and the government which, through Pravda's inclusion on the Cultural Committee, sanctions its existence, Krokodil has innumerable reliable sources for first-hand information. Thus it has the makings of credibility. Its tenacity at surviving in the middle ground between the populace and the bureaucracy is indicated by the fact that despite Stalin, or war, or other upheavals, Krokodil has never closed down since its first issue appeared in 1922.

Strong reader identity is vital to Krokodil. The magazine may scold Ivan and Tanya outrageously for being less than perfect, but done with a smile (or even the strong medicine of hooted scorn when that seems necessary) it is the advice of worldly peers. Conversely, Krokodil also lauds excellence. Since government officials, party functionaries and others in authority are also lectured, shown up or called to account in the magazine there is little evident favoritism of the elite or powerful. In its use of current but not notably slangy language, Krokodil sounds like the man on the street. Better yet, it knows what he thinks.

The proof is in the mailbags. Krokodil receives an average of 500 letters a day. Each is logged, routed and answered. Many are also forwarded to agencies for further action. (With the advent of consumerism in the Soviet Union, however, Krokodil has had to declare a moratorium on packages of undesirable merchandise -- or be innundated. Show and tell is now out; letters are fine.

Every 10 days is "the day of letters" when selected ones are shared by the staff. Some of Krokodil's most popular articles have orginated there. For one, a citizen in Moldavia wrote that the local night school for agricultural workers had a teacher but never taught anyone. Instead, the instructor sat in the classroom while tired farm workers stayed home. Yet the school was considered in session and statistics "proved" education of the masses. Foreign editor Mark Vilensky went to the community, wrote an amusing account of the sham school -- and then the letters poured in. "It's like that in my town, too" was the gist of many, leading to realistic night school plans by unionists and educators.

While it is perhaps impossible for Moscow editors to stay very close to grass-roots readership in a country spread across eight time zones, Krokodil stimulates and responds to letters to discover local attitudes. (Admittedly for

some letters there are no answers at hand. What to do about the Siberian reader who wrote that while he did not mind the winter weather a bit, the summers are too hot -- and what would Krokodil do about it? Every action-line has its limits.)

If Krokodil's staff ever runs short of ideas, there is little danger since the magazine adheres to the iron rule of Soviet journalism that periodicals should have at least 40% freelance material to assure the public's voice. In Krokodil's case the percentage is 70%. While rates are competitive (around $40 a typewritten page), prestige is high and rapport among the editors on the 40-person staff and the contributors is good. The celebrated Krokodil cartoons are 95% from freelance artists and are selected at coolly critical staff meetings presided over by the single staff artist.

Very likely Krokodil succeeds because it meets a communications need in its country, it knows its readers and its sources for material and it is well run. Among the hallmarks of magazine success, however, a final one cannot be underestimated. Over the years, Krokodil has evolved a strong, recognizable, appealing character, and it maintains its familiar identity while also being innovative and fresh. This duality is the open secret of Krokodil's success -- and the universal editorial lesson that it is folly to ignore.